

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHOM ONG CAVE AS AN ECOTOURISM DESTINATION IN NORTHERN LAOS

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The Chom Ong Cave was identified in 2006 by the provincial tourism department for the purpose of ecotourism as part of rural income creation. The following development was done in cooperation with the German Development Service DED (now GIZ). The Northern Lao – European Cave Project joined later in 2009 for the phase of complete exploration and creation of maps, photos and geological assessment. As a result of this cooperation, promotion material was created which attracted first media appearances. The cave can now be visited on a three day tour program. It is with a length of 17,150 meters the 3rd longest cave of Laos and 10th longest in Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

The Chom Ong Cave is located in the heart of Northern Laos near the capital of Oudomxay province. It is a region with a major crossroad connecting it to the neighbouring countries of Thailand, China and Vietnam and makes Oudomxay a traditional trading place with large markets. The cave became known when it was identified by the Lao government in 2006 as a potential object for ecotourism development in order to diversify income and reduce poverty in remote areas. Since then, measures were taken to prepare the village for development of the cave in line with principles of ecotourism. This was driven by the Provincial Tourism Department in close cooperation with the advice of the German Development Service (DED, now GIZ) and the local village community in Ban Chom Ong. It coincided with the activities of the Northern Lao-European Cave Project (the project) – an international group of speleologists who have been active in Laos since 2002. Their mission is the exploration and documentation of the major caving areas of northern Laos in cooperation with local authorities and international development organisations.

The project became aware of the existence of caves in Oudomxay province by the promotion of Chom Ong cave on the internet page of the tourism administration as part of ecotourism based trekking activities. It was claimed that this cave is one of the longest in Laos and an end had not been found. This stimulated great interest for proper exploration and the Oudomxay Tourism Department was contacted in December 2008. At this time the first infrastructure work was already finished and the survey of the cave was one of the next planned activities. It was quickly agreed to cooperate and a team of six speleologists arrived mid of January 2009 which was followed by two more visits in 2010 and 2011.

This article provides an overview of the geographical settings, the documentation and survey of the cave as well as the established marketing and promotion material. It summarizes the results of the cooperation and concludes with an outlook on the future perspective.

2. Geographical settings and infrastructure

Ban Chom Ong is situated in Xay District 25 km east of the provincial capital in a highly mountainous area with difficult access of 2.5 to 3 hours by road (Figures 1, 2). This is particularly true in the rainy season when only 4x4 vehicles can travel along the muddy roads. Chom Ong area comprises 5 villages with 353 households and a population of 2,500 people (Fig. 3). The poverty rate is 31%. The only available occupation is largely subsistent farming. Shifting cultivation (slash and burn) is the common production method, which, due to government regulations is reduced each year. Due to the lack of other income opportunities, farming is the only way for the population in the area to make a living. However, the production is only sufficient for 7 month of the year. Therefore during the rainy season many people have to work at the fields of other villages to earn money or rice.

As first phase of the project, toilet and bathroom facilities were installed, as well as ceramic filters supplying clean drinking water. Later a tourist guesthouse for overnight stays of 15 persons was built (Fig. 4). It is done in local style and consists of traditional interweaved bamboo walls



Figure 1. Location of Chom Ong cave in Northern Laos (star). It is at the center of Oudomxay province which has a road network linking China, Vietnam and Thailand with Luang Prabang.

and wooden floors. A separate kitchen area is attached to it. Later as preparation to receive foreign travellers, workshops in tour guiding and cooking were arranged by the GIZ.



Figure 2. Mountainous landscape north of Chom Ong village.



Figure 3. View of Chom Ong village with the surrounding karst hills appearing immediately behind the houses.



Figure 4. Main guest house for overnight stays with the main sleeping and eating room.

3. Cave development

The cave entrance is reached by a scenic path along the fields and later through monsoon forest. During the one hour walk, the river resurging from the lower entrance of the cave is crossed several times. The Chom Ong system stretches along a 4 km long mountain ridge. A river enters through a block fall at the northern end and resurges 4 km

later at the southern tip of the ridge. The cave has four entrances with the main entrance being an upper dry passage on the southern end of 8.5 m width and 4 m height (Fig. 5). The ridge hosts impressive river and fossil passages with dimensions 20 m wide and 25 m high (Fig. 6, 7). The cave can be toured as a through trip and the whole traverse takes 3.5 hours with an additional 1.5 hours to return from the northern entrance to Chom Ong village. The cave river and the fossil level are connected by steep passages and shafts in several places. A large tectonic fault resulted in two huge overlaying chambers measuring 100 m by 30 m in length/width and a height of up to 50 m each. From here the cave changes the character to one main river passage with two more upper levels of partial passage. The northern entrance is very narrow due to blockage by stones and mud. It requires some squeezing and is not suitable for normal tourists.

The survey of the cave was performed by using compass and clinometer for horizontal and vertical directions and a laser distometer for distances between the survey points. For each point, horizontal and vertical dimensions were recorded and details sketched at site in a scale of 1:1,000. Three parallel teams took only 5 days until the system was surveyed to a length of 11.3 km. On the last day a connection between the four known entrances was achieved. By 2011 the cave system was extended to its final length of 17,150 m (Fig. 8). It is the 3rd longest cave in Laos and 10th longest in Southeast Asia. The survey is published as atlas and overview map in the Berliner Hoehlenkundlicher Berichte Vol. 44.

The main dry passage was in 2010 equipped with a Lao built solar powered LED spotlight system by the company Sunlaobob. It is installed on the first 450 m and allows the visitor to experience the huge passages in an easy way. The installation consists of a total of 51 LED-lamps (8 pc 15 W, 8 pc 10 W, 10 pc 5 W, 20 pc 3 W, 5 pc 28W) an inverter (1200 VA / 24 V, 960 W) and 4 HBM Solar Panels (110 W 12 V).

The speleologists also took speleothems for paleoclimate studies at the Earth Science Department of Oxford University and recorded temperature profiles in passages close to the entrances. Cave fauna was collected for determination at partner institutes and universities with the focus on spiders which are known to be the one of the largest in the world like heteropoda maxima.



Figure 5. Upper fossil main entrance of Chom Ong on the southern ridge end.

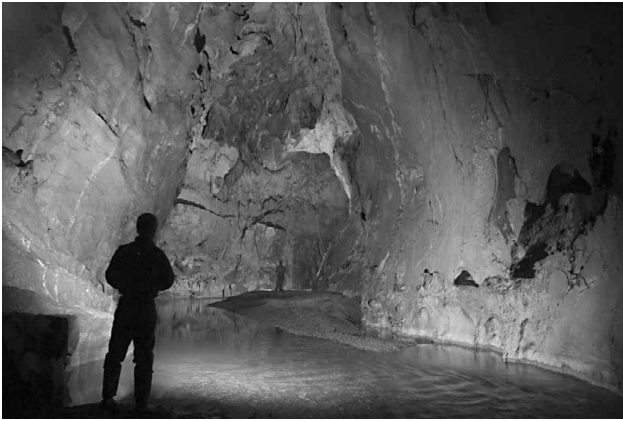


Figure 6. River passage of the Tham Chom Ong.



Figure 7. Main upper fossil passage about 400 m from the entrance.

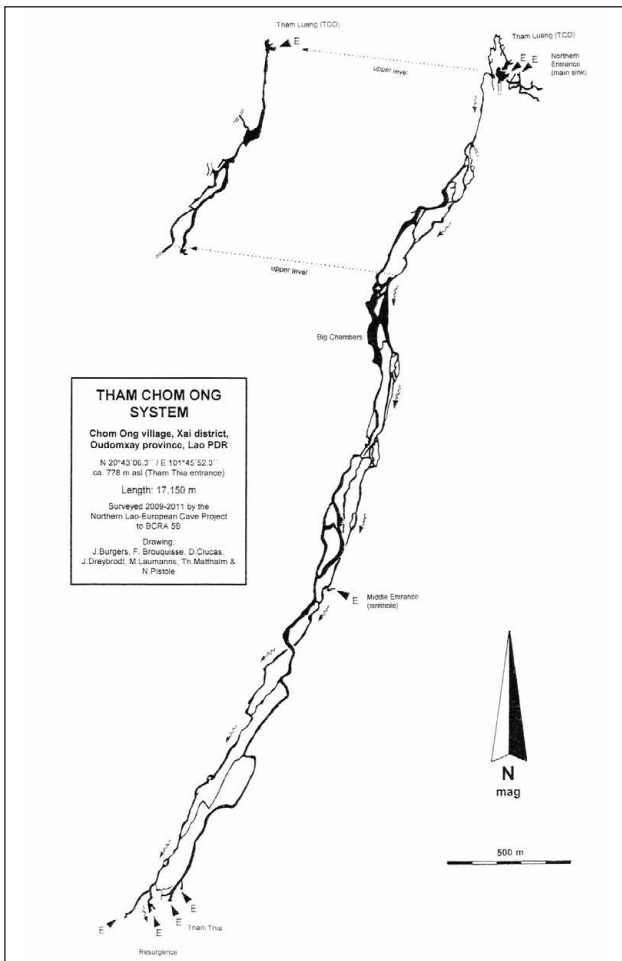


Figure 8. Overview Map of Tham Chom Ong System showing its final length of 17,150 m.

4. Marketing material

The results of the documentation were afterwards used to generate marketing material for promotion of the cave as ecotourism destination. An internet appearance on the provincial tourism office’s webpage allows booking of a 3 day tour and has information material for download. This is in the form of a flyer with information and pictures (Fig. 9). A large scale information board near the cave entrance provides further detailed information about the geological background and karst forms, explains some of the formation processes and contains a map of the cave (Fig. 10). Later media coverage by Lonely Planet TV and travel guide books followed enhancing the visibility for the individual tourist. In early 2011 national tour operators started to sell the cave as a destination for both adventure tourism and regular tours to the cave. Reports from Oudomxay Tourism Department confirm that during the high season approximately 2 groups per month visit the cave and the village.




Figure 10. Information board close to the main cave entrance.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

The initial identification of the Chom Ong Cave as ecotourism destination opened the way for the development as ecotourism cave. Within three years from 2007 until 2010, the infrastructure of the village was improved, training to the villagers for hosting international visitors was given and the cave fully explored to its today length of 17,150 m. The base for stimulating interest of visitors is laid by comprehensive and professional marketing and information material. The economical and social impact on the village remains to be seen and will evolve slowly due to the remoteness. Beside external factors it depends strongly on the commitment of the village committee to sustain the infrastructure and to make the cave an attractive long term experience on the agenda of the individual traveller. The impressive passages, beautiful karst landscape in combination with rural village experience (Fig. 11) will convince the tourists by its fascination. Planned access by a more direct and all year round road can further enhance visitor numbers.

We hope this example serves as a useful case-study for other projects and shows what can be achieved by close cooperation between speleologists, authorities and development projects (Fig. 12).

Tour Outline



Three-Day Exploration

The tour can also be done as a two-day tour, however for a relaxed tour we recommend three days.

Day 1:
Travel from Oudomxay to Ban Chom Ong using local transport. After lunch at Ban Chom Ong have a short visit to the Cave's southern entrance. Overnight stay in homestay at the village.

Day 2:
After breakfast enjoy an extended visit to the cave. You can spend between 4 and 6 hours in the cave. You can also enjoy your picnic-lunch in the cave (only the first 500m of the vast tunnel system of over 14 km are illuminated). Overnight stay in homestay at the village.

If you opt for the two-day tour you will have to be back at the village mid-afternoon to leave for Oudomxay.

Day 3:
After breakfast return to Oudomxay using public transport. You will arrive around lunch time.

Do's and Don'ts on the Tour

Dress Modestly
Please wear shirts that cover shoulders and pants or skirts that cover your knees. Shirts with a low neckline are not appropriate.

Public Bathing
Please do not bathe in the nude in public. Women should cover up with a sarong when bathing in public.

Photographs
Please ask before taking close-ups or portraits. Respect those who choose not to be photographed.

Gifts
Please do not give anything to children as this practice encourages begging. Also, do not give medicine to anyone but a doctor or nurse.

Body Language
In Lao, your head is "high" and your feet "low" don't gesture with your feet, and don't put your feet on furniture. Also do not touch someone else's head. Kissing and hugging in public is impolite please be discreet.

Respect Local Traditions
Please do not touch anything that may be of religious significance, such as Buddha statues, altars, and burial grounds. Please take off hats and shoes when entering temples.

Environment
Do not litter on land or in water; take all your garbage with you. Do not buy wildlife or wildlife products.

Purchasing Local Crafts
Please support local products by purchasing newly made quality handicrafts. Do not purchase unique items such as antiques or family heirlooms that are irreplaceable.

Drugs
Please do not do drugs in Lao. Drug tourism does damage and sets a very bad example for Lao youth.

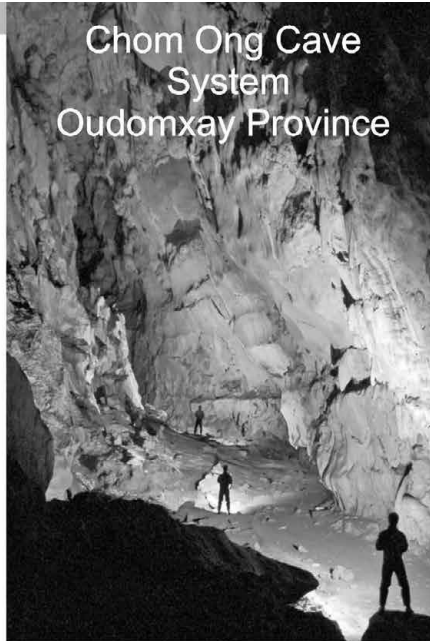
If you are interested in participating in the tour, or if you wish to get more information about our other programs, please contact the
Provincial Tourism Department of Oudomxay, Lao P.D.R.
(In front of the new market)
Telephone: 081 212483
Mobile: 020 2148679
Fax: 081 212482
Email: ptdoudomxay@yahoo.com
Website: www.oudomxay.info
Also check: www.laoscaveproject.de

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Tour Program

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Figure 9. Flyer of the tourism department with detailed tour outline.



Figure 11. Evening entertainment of visitors by traditional flute and songs.



Figure 12. The caving team together with representatives of the tourism department and the German Development Service at Ban Chom Ong village in 2009.

Acknowledgements

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